

VU Research Portal

Love, life and happiness

Soons, J.P.M.

2009

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Soons, J. P. M. (2009). *Love, life and happiness: A study of partner relationships and well-being in young adulthood*. [PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Aksant.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

6. Conclusion and discussion

6.1. Research questions

Many psychologists, sociologists, economists and other researchers have been concerned with questions about well-being and how well-being can be achieved and explained. Life course transitions have been shown to have a large impact on well-being. Young adulthood is a life stage in which these transitions occur frequently as the step from adolescent to adult involves several transitions in the educational, work, housing and family domains. Transitions in this latter domain, such as marriage, are found to have a particularly large impact on well-being (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004).

A substantial body of research has addressed the effects of relationship transitions on well-being, but many changes have taken place within the family domain since the 1960s (see section 1.4). Major developments in the family domain are a decreasing marriage rate, postponement of marriage and parenthood, a rising divorce rate and an increasing variety of alternative relationship types, unmarried cohabitation being the most common. The group of unmarried people has thus become more heterogeneous and the path to adulthood more complex. New studies are needed about the consequences of relationship transitions on well-being that take this diversity and complexity into account.

The aim of this dissertation was to gain more knowledge about the development of subjective well-being (SWB) in young adulthood in general and more in particular about the consequences of relationship transitions in young adulthood for well-being. To do so, a dynamic life course perspective was used, and attention was paid to concurrent transitions inside and outside the family domain. Four specific research questions were addressed:

1. How does the individual level of well-being develop during the course of young adulthood? (6.2.1)
2. What are the effects of transitions in the relationship domain on well-being? (6.2.2)
3. Which factors explain the effects of transitions in the relationship domain on well-being? (6.2.3)
4. What is the influence of the national context on the effects of relationship on well-being? (6.2.4)

We drew on the revised set-point theory and the conservation of resources theory to answer these questions. The most important assumption of the set-point theory (Headey and Wearing, 1989; see section 1.6; Diener *et al.*, 2006 and Headey, 2006) is that well-being is largely determined by personality and that only temporary changes in the level of SWB are possible. Due to adaptation processes, the level of well-being returns quickly and completely to a certain stable set-point. We used this theory to deduce hypotheses about the development of well-being over young adulthood and about the long-term effects of relationship transitions.

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2002; see section 1.6) assumes that changes in the availability of resources are reflected in changes in the level of SWB. Resources refers to everything that contributes to someone's well-being, or that enables someone to gain valuable other resources. Resource loss or gain results in a decline or increase in well-being respectively. People therefore try to gain resources and prevent loss of resources. This theory is used to explain why being in a relationship enhances well-being: The partner can be an important resource provider, enabling the other to gain additional resources.

To answer the research questions, we have used data from two surveys: The Panel Study on Social Integration in the Netherlands (PSIN) and the European Social Survey (ESS). The PSIN consists of longitudinal career data of young adults born in 1961, 1965 or 1969. We used five waves, collected between 1987 and 2005 (see section 1.8), containing valuable information about individual careers in the family and work domains and about well-being. The ESS consists of three waves of cross-sectional data from 30 European countries.

In the next section we will summarise and discuss the main findings pertaining to each question. In section 6.3, we will evaluate our theoretical framework, and our main conclusions will be presented in section 6.4. Finally, some limitations of this research are discussed and suggestions for further research are given (section 6.5).

6.2. The development of well-being

Before paying specific attention to relationship transitions and their effect on well-being, we examined how well-being develops during the course of young adulthood. The first research question was:

How does the individual subjective level of well-being develop during the course of young adulthood?

Several theories, such as the set-point theory, assume that well-being is very stable and that long-term change is impossible because well-being is largely determined by unchangeable genes and personality (Lykken, 2000). However, previous research has not consistently supported this view (Fujita and Diener, 2005 and Lucas, 2007). In addition, little attention has been paid to individual variation in well-being patterns. More research was therefore needed to examine individual long-term development in well-being during the course of young adulthood.

Summary of findings

To answer this research question, we examined in chapter 2 the development of individual well-being over an 18-year period. For each individual, two aspects were distinguished, viz. the mean level of SWB over the 18-year period and the pattern of SWB over this same period.

Using longitudinal PSIN data, we found substantial differences between people with respect to their mean level of well-being. Next, we defined six different template patterns on the basis of the set-point theory, the resources theory and previous research: Stable, increasing, decreasing, U-shaped, reversed U-shaped and fluctuating patterns. The SWB patterns of the PSIN respondents were compared with these template patterns. On the basis of this comparison the respondent was classified into one of the six pattern categories. There were clear differences in the young adult population in terms of their SWB patterns. We found that about one third of the young adults could be categorised as having a stable pattern, which means that there were no, or only very small changes in their level of well-being over the 18-year period. Among the two third of the respondents who were classified as having a changing pattern, the increasing and decreasing patterns were most common, and the U-shaped pattern the least common.

In addition to describing well-being patterns, we paid attention to age-related changes in well-being. We found that young adults in the Netherlands

and in Europe as a whole become slightly unhappier as they grow older (chapters 3 and 5), after controlling for their position in the work and family domains. This negative effect of age is in line with previous studies (Mroczek and Kolarz, 1998; Chen and Cohen, 2006; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2007 and Lelkes, 2008).

Discussion of findings

The fact that the majority of young adults had a changing SWB pattern and that there was no dominant changing pattern implies that there is a large variety in individual patterns of well-being. Well-being is likely to change, but not necessarily in a specific direction: Some people become happier, others unhappier. This presents a more varied picture than the research on population patterns of well-being, which found that on average well-being increases in the young adult population due to the positive transitions young adults experience in the family and work domains (Easterlin, 2006). In section 6.3 we will discuss some implications of these findings for the set-point theory.

Note also that the results concerning individual patterns and ageing might seem to contradict each other because the effect of ageing is negative, but the negative SWB pattern was not the most common pattern. This is a spurious contradiction because well-being decreases by only .04 each year as a result of age. This means that in the 18 years that respondents were followed, their well-being decreased by an average of .72 as a result of them growing older. However, the median magnitude of change was 2.5 and this value is used to define the SWB patterns. This means that respondents with an average age-related change in well-being would be classified as having a stable pattern, which was indeed the most common pattern found. The large difference between the magnitude of the age effect and the magnitude of the change in well-being shows that other factors than age, such as life events, have a large impact on changes in well-being. This suggests that one cannot draw conclusions about long-term developments in well-being from the age effect alone.

Ageing itself is intertwined with personal circumstances (Lelkes, 2008), which makes it more difficult to assess the net result of ageing. To assess the effect of age, it is necessary to exclude the effects of certain demographic factors and transitions, but even after controlling for these factors, the effect that you find is probably not only an age effect, but also the result of experiencing certain transitions, or the lack of such experiences. For example, in chapter 4 we found that the level of well-being of young adults

who are single or dating decreased as they grew older. This confirmed our expectations about the negative consequences of a 'social clock' (Settersten and Hagestad, 1996): i.e., the chances of finding a suitable partner decrease with age, which is likely to have a negative effect on people's self-confidence and their well-being. Nevertheless, young adults who were in a union also became somewhat unhappier as time passed, but this was probably the result of an adaptation effect and not an age effect (see section below).

6.3. The effects of relationship transitions on well-being

Many transitions occur in young adulthood, but transitions in the relationship domain are especially important for the well-being of young adults (Erikson, 1950; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004). Several chapters therefore paid attention to our second research question:

What are the effects of transitions in the relationship domain on well-being?

In the introductory chapter we discussed the importance of taking the diversity of relationships into account among unmarried people because this group has become more heterogeneous in recent decades and because it is unlikely that only marriage enhances well-being. Therefore, we examined the consequences of entering and exiting several relationship types: Steady dating, cohabitation and marriage.

Summary of findings

Firstly, we expected that all types of relationships would enhance well-being, and that each step towards increased commitment would result in an additional rise in well-being (Ross, 1995; Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005). Our expectations were confirmed. A more committed relationship was indeed related to a higher level of SWB. Single young adults became significantly happier when they started a dating relationship. An additional increase in well-being was caused by entering cohabitation and again by getting married (chapters 3 and 4). In chapter 4, this was shown using fixed-effect multilevel models, which examined only within-person changes and controlled for time-invariant selection variables.

A second finding was that the positive effects of entering a union decline over the years. It is a slow adaptation effect, which is similar for married

and cohabiting young adults. In the case of marriage, the predicted duration of adaptation is about 14 years and in the case of cohabitation about 8 years, in the hypothetical situation that there are no other influences on well-being. This means that over an 8- to 14-year period, the well-being level of those in a union is higher than the level of those outside a union. Even over an 18-year period, the well-being benefits of being in a union were therefore visible in the mean SWB level and the pattern of SWB, as shown in chapter 2. We found that young adults in a union have a higher average level of well-being, and that it did not matter whether they started the union during the period of observation of the panel study, or whether they were already in a union when the study started. Furthermore, young adults who start a union were found to be more likely to have an increasing SWB pattern during the course of these 18 years. Similarly, those who experienced a union dissolution were more likely to have a decreasing pattern.

Thirdly, we can conclude from the results in chapter 5 about differences between cohabitants and married couples in Europe that married people are happier than cohabiting people in most European countries, although the difference between these union types is rather small on average (.28 on a 10-point scale). The differences between the two union types are bigger in countries where cohabitation is less institutionalised, i.e. where it is less accepted and less common. This is further discussed in section 6.5.

Finally, we found that union dissolution has major negative consequences for SWB, as shown in all models. The negative effects of union dissolution on well-being are larger than the positive effects of entering a union, in particular shortly after the break-up. The negative impact of union dissolution therefore partly explains the lower well-being level of singles. Luckily for those who experienced union dissolution, entering a second or higher order union enhances their well-being again, and this more or less compensates for the negative effect of the previous union dissolution. Whether the level of well-being of those who remarry is similar to that of the continuously married, is unclear. It depends on the extent to which the people involved have adapted to the union dissolution and the duration of marriage of those who are continuously married (chapter 4).

Discussion of findings

These findings are in line with those of the few other studies that compare different relationship statuses among young adults (Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005). The differences found between people who are single, dating and cohabiting show that it is important to take into account the variety within

the unmarried group. They also suggest that the positive effect of marriage on well-being, as found in other studies, may be attributed not only to being married as such. The enhancing effect of marriage on well-being appears to have at least three components: Having a partner, living together and the legal commitment.

Another point is that almost all studies that pay attention to dating focus on adolescents or students (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001 and Collins, 2003). Our study shows that this type of relationship should not be neglected in other young adult groups, especially as the age at which people enter their first union is still on the rise and the greater part of young adulthood is spent as a single or dating (Liefbroer and Dykstra, 2000). Section 6.4 will further explain the differences between the relationship statuses.

The differences in well-being that we found in the PSIN data were relatively large compared with the ESS data and the findings of previous studies. For example, the effect size ($b/SD(Y)$) of the marriage effect on well-being was .37 among Dutch young adults in the PSIN data, but only .20 among young adults in the European ESS data. One of the reasons for the relatively large effect in the PSIN data is that we have compared the married with single people and not with the unmarried, which also includes dating and cohabiting people. Having a partner and living with a partner also enhances well-being; the average level of well-being of the unmarried is thus higher than the average level among singles. If the married are compared with the unmarried without any controls, the effect size of the marriage effect on SWB is .12 instead of .37. The difference in methods could be another explanation for the relatively large effects. In the PSIN data, a four-item scale was used to measure well-being. In many other surveys a one-item question is used. The amount of random error is smaller and the reliability is higher when using a scale rather than a single item. A third reason for the relatively large effects in the PSIN data could be that duration is controlled for in the study in chapter 4, which implies that the relationship coefficients found are the effects of relationships on well-being at the start of a relationship. Given that there is a certain adaptation effect, the effect of marriage on well-being at the start of the marriage is likely to be larger than the effect later in marriage, which has been measured in other studies. Finally, the association between marriage and well-being appears to be relatively strong in the Netherlands compared with other countries. In the ESS data, too, a larger effect size (.28) was found for the Netherlands than for the average European country (.20).

It may be questioned, of course, whether entering a relationship affects well-being, or whether there is a reverse causal effect: Selection based on well-being. As mentioned in the introduction and in several other chapters, there is some evidence for this kind of selection in case of people marrying after cohabitation, but the effects found are small. To control for this selection effect, we examined only the within-person variance in our longitudinal analysis in chapter 4. In line with our other results, we found an increase in well-being when the respondent moved from one relationship status to a relationship status with a higher level of commitment, and a decrease after union dissolution.

In chapter 2 we also found that relationship transitions are related to long-term changes in well-being patterns. Moreover, the mean SWB level of those who were in a union in the first wave differed from the mean level of those who started a union during the study. If selection based on well-being was a major explanation for the higher well-being of the married and cohabitants, these levels of SWB should have been similar. This indicates that selection cannot be the only explanation; there certainly is a causal effect of relationships on well-being. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude selection entirely, nor the possibility that the magnitude of the increase in well-being depends on the initial level of well-being.

In the introductory chapter, we stated that it is better to use a continuum of social attachment or commitment rather than simply to use marital status to determine the relationship status because the variety in relationship types has generally increased in recent decades (Ross, 1995). We therefore have categorised respondents by asking them whether they had a partner, whether they were living together with a partner and whether they were legally married, which are clear definitions. Some other studies use more behavioural measurements, such as the number of nights that partners spend together (Knab and McLanahan, 2007). These different measures are likely to result in different classifications and will, accordingly, lead to a large variation in the size of the categories dating and cohabiting because cohabitating relationships may differ strongly. Qualitative studies show that whereas some cohabitants simply started spending nights at their partner's place out of comfort and just wait and see what will happen with their relationship, others buy a house together and plan their marriage (Sassler, 2004 and Rhoades, Stanley and Markman, 2008). In these situations the level of commitment of the partners to the relationship is probably different. However, in some studies both types of relationships are both classified as cohabitants, but in other studies they are not. Because of this

variability in relationship categories it might be better to use a continuous score rather than separate statuses. This would do more justice to the true status of the relationship. This score could perhaps be constructed by asking questions about the commitment towards the relationship, the intention to stay together and the relationship quality.

As a final note, we would like to point out that we did not distinguish between the consequences of the dissolution of marriage (divorce) and the dissolution of cohabitation (separation). The reason is that most union dissolutions in our samples are separations as we used a young adult sample and because cohabitation is less stable than marriage. As we found a substantial impact of union dissolution, this implies that separation has large consequences for well-being and is probably related to a major loss of resources. This shows once again that cohabitation deserves to be studied. Nevertheless, considering the greater positive effects of marriage compared with cohabitation, the negative effects of divorce may also be larger than the negative effects of separation.

6.4. Factors explaining relationship effects

Besides examining the consequences of relationship transitions on well-being, we examined which factors explain these consequences. This is formulated in our third research question:

Which factors explain the effects of transitions in the relationship domain on well-being?

The literature offers several explanations for the higher SWB level of married people, among which three are especially popular. Firstly, married people save money and have more financial security because of economies of scale and pooling of resources (Ren, 1997; Waite and Gallagher, 2000 and Wilson and Oswald, 2005). In addition, married men tend to have a higher income (Waite, 2000 and Ahituv and Lerman, 2005). This explanation was expected to be more important for explaining differences between those who were living together and those who were not than for explaining differences between cohabiting and married people. The second explanation is that spouses encourage positive health behaviour, making each other healthier and happier. Thirdly, a spouse provides all sorts of social resources, such as emotional and instrumental support, social integration, sexual gratification, intimacy etc. We expected that these explanations would be valid not only

for the married, but for people in other relationship types as well, although the effect are likely to be stronger in a more committed relationship.

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) encompasses these explanations because such things as money, social support and love can all be considered to be resources. On the basis of this theory one would expect that the gains and losses of resources explain the effects of relationship transitions on well-being. If people enter a relationship or move into a relationship status with a higher level of commitment, the availability of resources increases, which in turn raises the level of SWB. According to the resources theory, material, social and personal resources mediate the influence of relationship transitions on SWB. For example, entering into cohabitation or marrying enables partners to pool their resources, giving them an economies-of-scale advantage (Wilson and Oswald, 2005). People who live with a partner should thus have a better financial position than those who live without one. This is thought to explain their higher level of well-being. Next to the mediating effect, a moderating effect of these resources was expected as well because the availability of some resources could be of greater importance to singles than to people with a partner. This is also evident in the assumption in the resources theory about a resource caravan effect.

Summary of findings

In chapter 3 we learned that material and social resources, and to a lesser extent personal resources, partly mediate the effects of relationship transitions. The differences between single and dating, dating and cohabiting, and cohabiting and married young adults were found to decrease by about 25-32% if these resources are controlled. People's financial situation and level of social integration, measured with religious participation, were the resources with the most explanatory power.

With respect to material resources we found a mediating effect of employment and (satisfaction with) income: Part of the relationship effects can be explained with these material resources. In addition, there was a moderating effect of daily activity: Having no full-time activity (no education and no job) was related to a lower level of SWB for young adults in all relationship statuses, except for the married. Furthermore, the SWB difference between people who live with a partner and those who live without one can be explained by the availability of material resources as well. Whereas having a partner with a job enhanced the well-being of

young adults who live with a partner, it did not enhance the well-being of those who are dating.

With respect to social resources, we found that social integration had a mediating effect. For instance, the well-being gap between cohabitants and the married became smaller if religious participation was controlled for. Singles had lower levels of instrumental and emotional support, but instrumental support had only a small mediating effect and no moderating effect. The emotional support measure did not explain the relationship effects at all, in contrast to our expectations. We had expected that emotional support would be an important provision of a relationship.

Personal resources also explained part of the relationship effects. The personal resource self-esteem mediated a small part of the effect of living together on well-being. For singles, neuroticism had a moderating effect (chapters 2 and 3). Not having a partner was found to enhance the negative effect of neuroticism on well-being, or conversely: Starting a union appears to buffer the negative effects of a high level of neuroticism. Chapter 2 also found that for more extravert people, the effects of entering and exiting cohabitation or marriage on the mean level of well-being were smaller.

Because relationship transitions take place in a life stage when many other major transitions take place (Rindfuss, 1991), it is important to take the occurrence of transitions in parallel life domains into account. Parenthood is the transition that is most closely linked to relationships, for most children are born in cohabiting or married relationships (Baizán, Aassve and Billari, 2003 and Kiernan, 2004). In agreement with previous studies, we found that parents are happier than childless people. In contrast to relationship transitions, parenthood only affected the mean level of SWB, but not the SWB pattern (chapter 2). This means that making the transition to parenthood did not determine well-being development in the long term. Furthermore, we found that there was only a positive effect of parenthood on well-being for people who were living together. For parents living alone having children resulted in a lower level of SWB (chapter 4). This is in line with studies that show that single parents are unhappier than coupled parents (Simons, Beaman, Conger and Chao, 1993 and Shields and Wooden, 2003).

Transitions and circumstances in the work domain are related to transitions in the family domain as well, as described above. For example, unemployment has a negative effect on well-being, with the exception of

the married. The results regarding these concurrent transitions show that the relationship transitions have direct effects on well-being, but that it is important to take other transitions in other domains into account in order to get a complete picture of a person's level of well-being.

Discussion of the findings

There were two unexpected findings with respect to the explanation of relationship effects. Firstly, in several chapters attention was paid to the difference in well-being between unmarried cohabitation and marriage, the so-called cohabitation gap. As it had been argued that the living arrangements of these two groups are very similar and that both have the economic benefits of sharing a household, we expected that material resources would have less power in explaining the difference between marriage and cohabitation than in explaining differences between other relationship statuses. This was not confirmed because material resources explained the added effect of marriage on well-being in addition to the well-being benefit of living together (chapters 3 and 5).

A possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that there might be a selection effect based on these material resources in the case of cohabitation and marriage. Daily activity and financial satisfaction were the most important factors. Having no full-time activity is related to lower well-being among cohabitants, but not among the married. This is probably related to the fact that cohabitants are less likely to actually pool their resources (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990). They may also benefit less from economies of scale as a result of a lower level of specialisation (Oppenheimer, 2000). The married more often prefer the specialised breadwinner model, where one partner, usually the husband, earns the family income. Cohabiting couples find it more important that both partners have equal incomes (Waldron *et al.*, 1998; Brines and Joyner, 1999 and Kalmijn, Loeve and Manting, 2007). Having a job might therefore be more important for the cohabitant's level of SWB than for the SWB level of the married.

A second unexpected finding was that social support variables did not explain much of the differences between relationship statuses, although social provisions are considered important explanations for the higher level of well-being of the married compared with unmarried people in general and compared with cohabitants in particular (Nock, 1995 and Cutrona, 2004). Singles perceived to have less social support compared to all other people with a partner, but this difference in support did not

explain the relationship effects. This study measured the social resources emotional and instrumental support, and social integration. Perhaps other social resources, such as love or intimacy, would have more explanatory power than the ones we measured. It would be worthwhile examining this in future studies.

6.5. The national context and effects of unions on well-being

As described in the introductory chapter, there are many differences between countries with respect to marriage and cohabitation. Countries differ, among other things, in terms of the percentage of people who opt for cohabitation or marriage, and the attitudes and values that are attached to these union types. These country differences are likely to result in differences in the consequences of these unions for well-being. This will be further discussed to answer our last research question:

What is the influence of the national context on the effects of relationship on well-being?

Summary of findings

This question was analysed with European Social Survey data on 30 European countries. We expected that the magnitude of well-being differences between cohabitation and marriage, the cohabitation gap, would vary across European countries. This was confirmed in chapter 5. In most countries married young adults were happier than cohabiting young adults, but in several countries the well-being gap was absent or even reversed.

Furthermore, our results show that selection on personal characteristics did not explain the country differences. As mentioned in the previous section, these selection factors are important in explaining why married people are happier than cohabitants, but they are not important in explaining why the cohabitation gap differs across countries.

In addition, we examined the level of institutionalisation as an explanatory factor, where institutionalisation refers to the strength of social norms that define people's behaviour in a social institution (Cherlin, 2004). This was measured with a combination of the degree of acceptance of cohabitation and the percentage adults that was cohabiting or ever cohabited. We found that in countries where cohabitation is more institutionalised, the well-being gap between cohabitants and the married is smaller.

Discussion of findings

The relatively large differences found between the European countries contrast with the findings of Diener and others (Diener *et al.*, 2000), who concluded that the benefits of marriage are almost universal. Our findings qualify this conclusion by showing that it is only universal when married people are compared with single people but not when they are compared with cohabiting people.

The results show that the well-being gap between cohabitants and the married is smaller in countries where cohabitation is more institutionalised. On the basis of these results it can be expected that if demographic changes continue and if cohabitation becomes more integrated in legislation, social norms and behaviour, that well-being differences between the two union types will become smaller and may disappear in many countries, even in more traditional ones. Being married is less necessary to be socially accepted in these countries where cohabitation is institutionalised (Cherlin, 2004). Also the practical importance of marriage will decrease if cohabitation is more accepted (Kefalas, 2007). People no longer need to be married for the financial benefits in that situation, for many men and women are financially independent and the financial benefits can also be gained from alternative relationship types. A higher level of institutionalisation also means that cohabitants become a less selective group. Differences in the composition between cohabitants and the married are then likely to disappear, which in turn may decrease other differences between the two relationships types.

On the other hand, it should be noted that if cohabitation becomes the standard way to start a union, the group of people that chooses to marry without preceding cohabitation might become more selective (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006). If this selection is based on certain factors that are also related to well-being differences between people who marry directly and those who cohabit first may increase again. For instance, the married group may become more religious because religious people will probably continue to choose marriage over cohabitation. As we saw, religion is an important selection factor explaining the well-being gap between cohabitants and the married. It is likely to become even more important in the future in explaining these differences in well-being. Furthermore, marriage may become valued for reasons other than those traditionally mentioned. For instance, the symbolic meaning of marriage increases (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001 and Kefalas, 2007).

A related issue is that it some people question whether the marriage rates should be increased, among other things by discouraging cohabitation. This means that cohabitation would not be further institutionalised. For instance, in the United States much value has been attached to marriage as an institution and many people actively encourage marriage (see for example the Heritage Foundation). One of the purposes of these marriage defenders is to put an end to the increasing union dissolution rates and the negative consequences divorce has for children. They encourage marriage and not unmarried cohabitation because cohabitants are poorer than the married (Smock *et al.*, 2005) and because the divorce rate is higher among cohabitants (Wagner and Weiss, 2006). However, our results show that the larger negative outcomes of cohabitation are related to the selection of the people that choose to cohabit; it is not, or at least not only an endogenous aspect of the relationship type itself. In countries where cohabitation is almost equal to marriage in terms of acceptance and legal rights, there is less selection into cohabitation. And as there are fewer differences between cohabitation and marriage, cohabiting relationships are likely to be more stable in these countries (Wagner and Weiss, 2006). It may therefore be wiser to encourage stable relationships in general, rather than encouraging only marriage. Furthermore, the negative consequences of divorce for children are strongly related to poverty. Making an effort to improve the financial situation of single parents may therefore be more effective than promoting marriage to decrease the poverty among those children.

6.6. Implications for theories about relationships and well-being

In this dissertation, we focused on two theories to describe developments in well-being and to explain the effects of relationship transitions on well-being: The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and the set-point theory, also called the dynamic equilibrium model (Headey and Wearing, 1989). We will now discuss the implications of our findings for these theories.

Conservation of resources theory

The conservation of resources theory (see section 1.5) was used to explain why relationships have a positive effect on well-being. The assumption is that a loss of resources or the threat of losing resources, decreases well-being, and that gaining resources is related to an increase in well-being. These resources can be anything that enables people to attain their goals. We hypothesized that people gain resources when they move from singlehood

to having a partner, or when they enter a relationship status with a higher level of commitment. This hypothesis was based on the idea that being in a relationship has certain advantages, such as economies of scale, and that the partner is an important resource provider. This gain in resources, and the reduction in uncertainty about losing resources, was expected to lead to an increase in happiness. Similarly, relationship dissolution was expected to result in a lower level of SWB because of the related loss of resources.

The results show, firstly, that material, personal and social resources are related to changes in well-being, as the theory predicts. The resources theory assumed that personality characteristics would be key resources, in that they would be key to the perception and management of other resources (Thoits, 1994). We deduced from this assumption that personality would have a larger influence on well-being and would offer a better explanation for relationship effects than other types of resources. We found that personality is important indeed, but that it is not necessarily more important than other resources as a direct source of well-being. Neuroticism and extraversion affected the mean level of SWB, but they were not related directly to a certain SWB pattern (chapters 2 and 3). Nevertheless, they were found to moderate the effects of relationship transitions on well-being in the long run. Therefore, it is likely that personality has a strong indirect influence on well-being, for example, in combination with life events.

Secondly, relationship effects on well-being can be explained in part by resources, which confirms the expectations of the theory. People gain resources when they enter a relationship and they lose resources when the relationship ends. These gains and losses are reflected in the long-term SWB patterns (chapter 2). Material resources appear to play an important role and personality and social integration are also of some relevance. The effects of entering relationships were smaller than the effects of losing relationships. This is also in line with the theory that a loss of resources has a larger impact than a gain in resources (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001). Still, resource gains can have a large and long-term impact as well.

Another expectation of the resources theory was that the initial high or low availability of resources could facilitate the gain or loss of more resources: The resource caravan idea. This idea is only partially supported: Single people who start with a low level of personality resources are more likely to have a decreasing or fluctuating well-being pattern, which indicates that their resource levels decrease over time (chapter 2). This is one of the assumptions of the resources theory that needs more testing.

We can conclude that the resources theory is suitable for explaining relationship effects. The advantage of the theory is that it encompasses a number of explanations that have not been combined in one framework before: Material benefits, personality characteristics and the provision of support. However, this generality is also a potential pitfall for the theory, for if everything that contributes to well-being is a resource, it becomes difficult to distinguish specific resources that explain the effects of relationship transitions on well-being.

Set-point theory

The set-point theory (see section 1.5), also called the dynamic equilibrium theory, assumes that only temporary fluctuation in well-being is possible (Headey and Wearing, 1989 and Suh *et al.*, 1996). After an initial change, the level of well-being will return quickly and completely to a certain set-point or base line. This is called the adaptation effect. The set-point is determined by genes and personality. The theory was adjusted because research showed that it was too strict in some respects (Diener *et al.*, 2006; Headey, 2006). In the revised version, people may have different set-points, certain major life events may change the set-point for some people, and personality affects the pace of the adaptation process.

A first assumption of the original theory is that in general only temporary fluctuations are possible in well-being after a life event because there is a quick and complete adaptation, where well-being returns to the pre-event level of SWB. Indeed, we found an adaptation effect after entering a union and after union dissolution (chapter 4), but this adaptation was very slow and probably not complete. In chapter 2, we saw that the effects of starting and ending relationships are visible over an 18-year period, and that being in a union at the start of the study is not related to a decreasing SWB pattern. In chapter 4 we calculated that it would take about 8-14 years to return to the level of well-being people had before they entered a union, all other circumstances remaining equal. In the revised version it is argued that some negative life events may have long-lasting consequences for well-being (Diener *et al.*, 2006), but our research shows that this is also true for positive life events.

A second assumption of the original and the revised theory, which follows from the first, is that in the long run levels of SWB remain fairly stable. This assumption was not confirmed. Although the most common well-being pattern was the stable one, most young adults had an increasing, decreasing

of more variable pattern (chapter 2). This is in contrast even to the revised version of dynamic equilibrium (Headey, 2006), in which it is stated that only for a minority of people the level of well-being changed significantly in the long run. Moreover, Headey attributed these changes to personality, but our studies show that life events can cause these changes as well.

A third assumption is that personality has a major influence on well-being and determines the set-point level, as the resources theory proposes as well. As mentioned, this assumption proved to be too strict. In accordance with the set-point theory, personality traits are indeed important for explaining well-being, although the contribution of certain life events or certain resources should not be underestimated. When examining long-term patterns, we found that personality had long-term effects on well-being, but only in combination with life events. There were no direct effects of personality in the long run, which is in contrast to the set-point theory. Nevertheless, personality can have a stabilising effect in the interaction with life events. For instance, the more extravert people were, the smaller the consequences of relationship transitions (chapter 2). The reverse effect, that life events have a stabilising effect on personality, is also possible, e.g., the negative effect of neuroticism was diminished by entering a union (chapter 2). This interaction between personality and life events and the consequences for well-being have recently been given more attention (Headey, 2008), but there still is a lack of knowledge about this issue. It is likely, for example, that some traits affect not only the mean level of SWB, but also the possibility and direction of change in well-being, also in the long run (Diener *et al.*, 2006). This idea is similar to the resource caravan idea: Being a positive person, which is a resource, enables you to experience more positive events, which in turn enhances the availability of resources.

We would like to extend the assumption about the indirect impact of personality and put it in a developmental perspective. From this perspective, the traits people are born with affect a young person's interaction with his social environment and the perception of this interaction. The social environment responds in a certain way, thereby reinforcing the initial behaviour. This may affect the likelihood of experiencing certain life events and the perception of these events, and consequently affect well-being, in the long run as well. Conversely, it is possible that small changes in behaviour change the response of the social environment and put a positive or negative spiral into action, which may also change someone's personality (Rutter *et al.*, 1997 and Scollon and Diener, 2006).

The influence of personality, transitions and circumstances is intertwined, which makes it difficult to determine which factor explains which change in the level of SWB. A more holistic perspective is needed to fully encompass the complex interaction processes between personality and life events and their influence on well-being.

To conclude, our findings lend support to some assumptions of the revised set-point theory, but we believe that the set-point theory is still too strict in that it expects that the level of well-being is stable in the long run. In addition, more attention should be given to the intertwined effects of personality and life events.

6.7. Main conclusions

Based on the findings of this dissertation, we can draw several main conclusions. Firstly, Dutch young adults are fairly happy with their lives, whether or not they are in a relationship. This level of happiness is likely to change over the course of young adulthood, however. The direction of this long-term change is determined primarily by the occurrence or absence of life events. For example, the level of well-being of young adults who do not live with a partner slowly decreases with age, but there is no age effect for those who do live together. The magnitude of the change depends on the combination of life events and personality.

Secondly, starting a relationship makes people happy, and moving from steady dating to cohabitation or from cohabitation to marriage additionally enhances well-being. Most can be gained from starting to live with a partner either inside or outside of marriage. These effects of relationships were larger than the effects of starting a job or becoming a parent. Relationships are thus very important for people's well-being.

Thirdly, despite the decreasing marriage rate and the growing importance of alternative long-term commitments, marriage still appears to be important for young adults' well-being, although the difference in well-being between cohabiting and married young adults is rather small, in the Netherlands and other European countries. One may expect that if the process of institutionalisation of cohabitation continues at its current pace in countries where cohabitation is not institutionalised to a large degree yet, the difference in well-being between the two union types will probably become smaller in the coming decades and may even disappear in Europe and other developed

countries. However, as mentioned in section 6.5, it remains to be seen whether this process of a decreasing difference will continue indeed.

Finally, entering a cohabiting or married union enhances well-being, but this beneficial effect slowly fades away. Nevertheless, for many years, the level of well-being of young adults in a union remains higher than that of those who live without a partner because young adults in a union have more resources, and because the level of well-being of those who have never lived with a partner also decreases. There is no difference between cohabiting and married people in this respect.

6.8. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Several limitations of the conducted studies can be mentioned and several suggestions for future research can be made. One issue concerns the measurement of well-being. As is discussed in section 1.2, we have chosen to measure life satisfaction: A general indicator of the subjective experience of well-being. This choice was made, among other things, because it can be measured retrospectively over longer periods which is necessary to measure long-term changes. The disadvantage of this general measure is that it is not very detailed or precise. People usually determine their well-being on the basis of how they feel at the time of evaluation, and during the most salient experience within the time period measured. This is referred to as peak-end evaluation (Kahneman, 1999); it may result in a biased evaluation. However, respondents in all relationship statuses use the same peak-end evaluation. We therefore believe that it is not a big problem. Moreover, the aim of this study was to compare several relationship statuses with each other and not to determine the absolute level of SWB. In addition, the reliability of the highly validated Satisfaction with Life Scale (Larsen, Diener and Emmons, 1985) that we used over the waves of the PSIN was high. Finally, previous studies show similar associations between marital status and well-being and a similar explanation of the relationship effects across measures. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that our results would have been somewhat different if we had used another measure of well-being (Compton *et al.*, 1996; Bierman *et al.*, 2006 and Shapiro and Keyes, 2008).

Another data issue is that we did not include a control variable in our longitudinal models indicating whether the respondent had started or finished unions between the waves. It is possible that someone who is in a union in wave *t* has exited this union and entered a new union before

wave $t+1$, or vice versa. This information was not included because the model would have become too complicated and because this control variable would probably have been too highly correlated with the variable that indicates previous union dissolution. This union dissolution variable is more important because one of our aims was to examine how union dissolution affects well-being.

A third point of discussion is that some research shows that relationship quality is just as important as relationship status for well-being (Ren, 1997; Kim and MacKenry, 2002 and Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005). Unfortunately, in the ESS data no information was available about relationship quality and in the PSIN different questions were used in different waves, or it was not measured at all. This is not a big issue, however, because relationship quality and status act independently (Ren, 1997; Kim and MacKenry, 2002 and Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005). Furthermore, the focus of this study is on the transitions into and out of relationships and not on intrarelational processes. That said, it would be an interesting topic for future research and it would be worthwhile examining whether the effects of relationship transitions on well-being are similar to those on relationship quality, considering that well-being and relationship quality are strongly related (Davila, Karney, Hall and Bradbury, 2003). It would also be worthwhile examining whether the interaction effects of resources and other transitions and relationships on well-being are actually mediated by relationship quality. Social resources would then perhaps have shown more impact on well-being. Another option, which we mentioned in section 6.3, is to make a combined continuous measure of relationship status and relationship quality. This would better describe the actual situation people are in.

A related point for further research could be to take an even closer look at the actual situation of the cohabitant and compare it with the situation of the married. Some cohabitants live together out of convenience without the intention of marrying, others are already planning their marriage and some consciously reject marriage altogether (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004 and Rhoades *et al.*, 2008). Cohabitation in late adulthood may also be different from cohabitation in young adulthood; for instance because a large proportion of people have experienced divorce or widowhood (King and Scott, 2005). These different expectations and the different relational histories are likely to result in different levels of well-being (Brown and Booth, 1996). To examine this issue, detailed information about the preferences, reasons and situations is needed. Longitudinal datasets

including this information are not yet available, especially not studies that have been running for as many years as the PSIN.

In our introduction, we mentioned the major demographic changes that have taken place, referred to collectively as the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe and Neidert, 2006). In some countries, most changes took place in the 1970s and 1980s, but in other countries marriage, divorce and cohabitation rates and fertility levels are only just starting to change. It is important to take this into account and to keep monitoring the changes in the future and to examine how this affects relationships and well-being. Coming back to the metaphor we used in the introduction, the transitions on the bridge that people have to cross to go from childhood to adulthood may be changing, but still people are happier crossing it with a partner at their side.

References

- Abbott, R., T. Croudace, G. Ploubidis, D. Kuh, M. Richards and F. Huppert (2008), The relationship between early personality and midlife psychological well-being: Evidence from a UK birth cohort study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 43(9), 679-687.
- Ahituv, A. and R.I. Lerman (2005), *How do marital status, wage rates, and work commitment interact?* (Discussion Paper 1688). Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA).
- Amato, P.R. and S.J. Rogers (1999), Do attitudes toward divorce affect marital quality? *Journal of Family Issues*, 20(1), 69-86.
- Arts, W., J. Hagenaars and L. Halman (2003), *The cultural diversity of European unity: Findings, explanations and reflections from the European Values Study*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Avellar, S. and P.J. Smock (2005), The economic consequences of the dissolution of cohabiting unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(2), 315-327.
- Axinn, W.G. and A. Thornton (1992), The relationship between cohabitation and divorce: Selectivity or causal influence? *Demography*, 29(3), 357-374.
- Baizán, P., A. Aassve and F.C. Billari (2003), Cohabitation, marriage, and first birth: The interrelationship of family formation events in Spain. *European Journal of Population*, 19(2), 147-169.
- Barrett, A. (1999), Social support and life satisfaction. *Research on Aging*, 21(1), 46-72.
- Baumeister, R.F., E. Bratslavsky, C. Finkenauer and K.D. Vohs (2001), Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323-370.
- Baumeister, R.F. and M.R. Leary (1995), The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
- Beck, U. and E. Beck-Gernsheim (1996), Individualization and 'precarious freedoms': Perspectives and controversies of a subject-oriented sociology. In P. Heelas, S. Lash and P. Morris (Eds.), *Detraditionalization: Critical reflections of authority and identity* (pp. 23-48). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Berger, C.R. and J.J. Bradac (1982), *Language and social knowledge: Uncertainty in interpersonal relationships*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Berkman, L., T. Glass, I. Brisette and T. Seeman (2000), From social integration to health: Durkheim in the new millennium. *Social Science and Medicine*, 51(6), 843-857.
- Bernasco, W., P.M. de Graaf and W.C. Ultee (1998), Effects of spouse's resources on occupational attainment in the Netherlands. *European Sociological Review*, 14(1), 15-31.